

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter will look at the family system theory.

Introduction

People do not exist in a vacuum. They live, play, go to school, and work with other people. Most anthropologists agree that, next to their peculiar tendency to think and use tools, one of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings is that they are social creatures. The social group that seems to be most universal and pervasive in the way it shapes human behavior is the family. For social workers, counselors, and psychologists, the growing awareness of the crucial impact of families on their clients has led to the development of family systems theory.

Family systems theory is more than a therapeutic technique. It is a philosophy that searches for the causes of behavior, not in the individual alone, but in the interactions among the members of a group. The basic rationale is that all parts of the family are interrelated. Further, the family has properties of its own that can be known only by looking at the relationships and interactions among all members.

The family systems approach is based on several basic assumptions:

- Each family is unique, due to the infinite variations in personal characteristics and cultural and ideological styles;
- The family is an interactional system whose component parts have constantly shifting boundaries and varying degrees of resistance to change;
- Families must fulfill a variety of functions for each member, both collectively and individually, if each member is to grow and develop; and
- Families pass through developmental and nondevelopmental changes that produce varying amounts of stress affecting all members.

These assumptions are diagramed in figure 1 (see next page). The components and their relationship to the whole system are as follows:

- Family structure consists of the descriptive characteristics of the family. This includes the nature of its membership and its cultural and ideological style. These characteristics are the input into the interactional system. They are the resources and the perception of the world that shape the way in which the family interacts.

- Family interaction is the hub of the system. It is the process of interaction among family members that determines the rules by which the family is governed. This is the family's level of cohesion, its adaptability, and its communication style. Finally, these interactions work together to serve individual members and collective family needs.

- Family function is the output of the interactional system. Utilizing the resources available through its structure (input), the family interacts to produce responses that fulfill its needs.

- The family life cycle introduces the element of change into the family system. As the family moves through time, developmental and non-developmental changes alter the family structure and/or the family's needs. These, in turn, produce change in the way the family interacts.

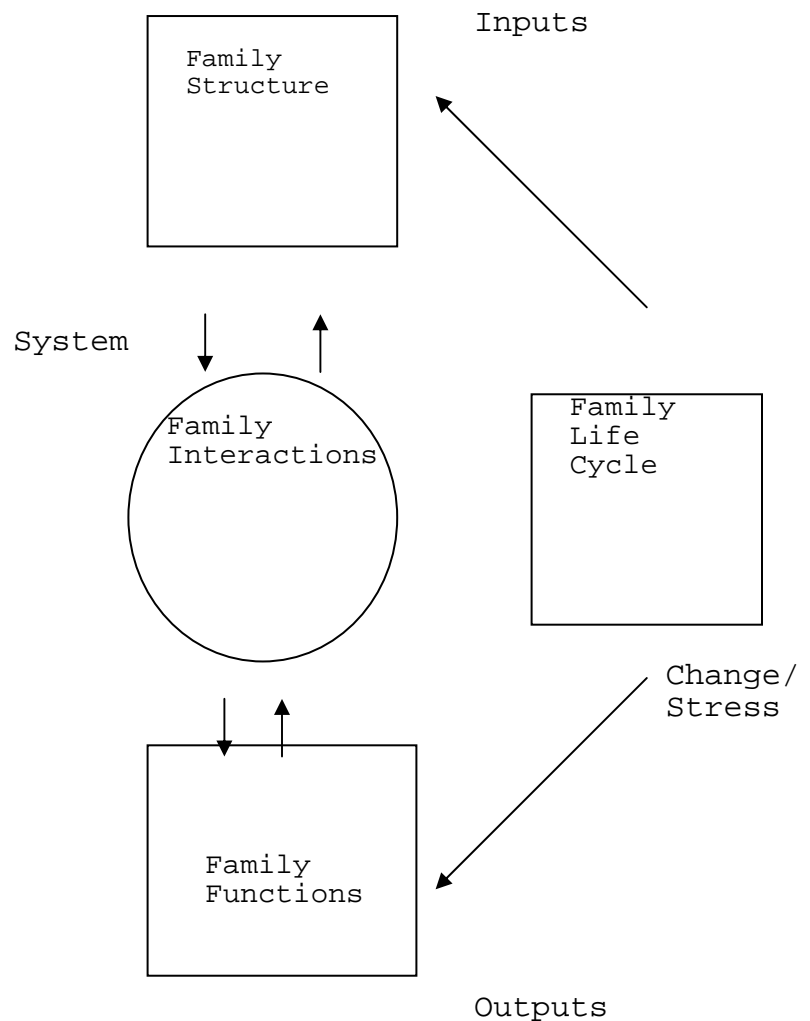


Figure 1. **What is a Family System?**

Understanding something as complex as a family unit is not an easy task. What does it mean to say that the family is a system? Webster (1979) defines a system as a "regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole." Certainly members of families are interrelated and interdependent parts of a whole.

Many writers in discussing the family as a system use the analogy of the heating system of a house. As Haley (1963) explains it, the furnace responds to the signal from the thermostat, but the thermostat responds to the temperature of the room which responds to the heat from the furnace. Each element serves a function in the total heating system.

The elements are interdependent. For example, when the air becomes "too cold" the thermostat signals the furnace to give more heat, and when the air is "warm" the thermostat signals the furnace to shut off. The temperature in the house fluctuates within a narrow range around the setting of the thermostat.

The heating system has a kind of balance, or homeostasis, and all of the elements of the system (the furnace, the thermostat, the room temperature) are involved in maintaining that balance. As long as the setting remains the same, the temperature remains stable. Even when the setting is changed the elements of the heating system still relate to each other in the same way. There are rules which govern this process, and all parts of the system work to maintain the rules, in this case, the setting.

This analogy is comparable to the family system in which the elements, the family members, are dependent upon one another. In a similar manner, families develop a kind of balance in their relationship patterns.

The family is not just a collection of individuals. It is a whole larger than the sum of its parts.

A Delicate Balance

All family members have a stake in maintaining the delicate balance in their relationship patterns. The action of one member affects all others, and that member is in turn affected by the reaction of others. This can be seen at times of change when the established balance is threatened.

Something as seemingly simple as a change in working hours can have implications for the relationships of everyone in the family. For example, a father is suddenly changed to the day shift on his job after working for years at night. What happens when he is there in the evening to interact more closely with the other family members? Will the children see his increased attention as interference in their established patterns? If they object to this change, he may interpret it as lack of respect or rejection.

On the other hand, the father may see problems that he has not noticed before because he was home during hours that the children were in school. His wife may have become involved in evening activities that she may not want to give up to be with him. She may resist his involvement with the children after enjoying a "power" position over the years. He might decide that it would be best to immerse himself in TV or outside activities as a way of avoiding some of the issues that the increased opportunity for closeness with the family present.

A change in the family situation means readjustment of the total system and can pose problems and challenges for every single member.

A Stable But Open System

When individuals live together in an intimate environment, such as a family, they begin to set limits on each other. There is a range of behavior that is acceptable and a certain amount of deviation that is tolerated. When individual behavior threatens to violate the limits that have been agreed upon, members respond by trying to reestablish the limits and to preserve the stability of the family system.

All members of the family system participate in this process of maintaining stability. For example, a child, upset after witnessing the fighting of his parents, may begin to have problems in school. He notes that when his parents focus on his problems, they spend less time fighting. In a sense, the child is able to unite them in concern over him. Even though they may eventually express anger towards him, absorbing their anger is better than having them separate. The parents, too, may take note of the fact that they get along better when the child is having problems and may begin, at some level, to reinforce the child's difficulties.

Though this sequence is dysfunctional for the child, it is functional for the continuity of the system. It keeps the family together, and all of the family members are invested in maintaining it. Typically, in such a family the child experiences a problem at times when he perceives that there is trouble between his parents. It is also possible that one of the parents, feeling anxiety over marital strife, could trigger this pattern by interpreting the child's behavior as problematic, even though that behavior might be judged quite "normal" by an outside observer. This process is not conscious. The individuals do not plan it. The pattern evolves and persists to serve the positive function of maintaining the stability of the family system over a period of time. Mother, father, and child all participate in the pattern.

When the family is viewed in this way, it becomes impossible to think of family assessment as arriving at a separate diagnosis of each individual family member at a particular moment "frozen" in time. Rather, focusing upon understanding the nature and the quality of the interactions among family members over time becomes essential. And, while family systems tend to maintain stability, they are not rigid and unchanging. A family must be prepared to respond to the changing needs of its members over time, to unpredictable events that involve family members, and to pressures that come from outside family boundaries.

Every family is faced with the test of allowing for growth and change while maintaining the integrity of the system.

Characteristics of the Family System

A large family which includes grandparents, parents, and children whose ages range from birth to seventeen is obviously very different structurally from a family consisting of a mother and two children. Each of these families will be organized differently, too. In trying to understand more about these families, it is important to look at various characteristics within each family. The following sections will explore five characteristics of the family system:

- External and internal family boundaries;
- Family rules;
- Family role organization;
- Power distribution among family members; and
- The communication process.

External Boundaries

Ann Hartman (1979) has defined the external boundary of a family as "that invisible line that separates what is 'inside' the family and what is 'outside' the family." This outside boundary defines the whole family in relation to other systems such as schools, churches, or other families, and outside individuals.

Although this boundary is not physical, it can be detected, to some extent, by observing the way a family uses its space. For instance, the family can describe its boundaries quite precisely with fences, walls, and hedges. Or, it can rely simply on the property line with little to separate one family's property from another. The family, too, can make it relatively easy or difficult to gain access by use of gates, doors, dogs, doorbells, or intercom systems. Families do make statements about how they perceive their boundaries with these physical statements about privacy and accessibility.

In addition to its use of space, a family has many attitudes, rules, and communication patterns which help to define its boundaries. There are rules about who is included in or given access to the family, such as extended family, in-laws, friends, and neighbors, for example. The nature of a family's boundaries might range from an extreme closed quality to an extreme open quality. Kantor and Lehr (1976) write about different structural arrangements within families and identify the following as some of the characteristics of a closed type:

- Tightly controlled access to family space - likely to have locked doors, fences and unlisted phones. Strangers are not admitted easily;
- Connections of family members to outside systems are rigidly controlled by rules and implemented by those in authority - many rules exist about permitted activities and who can associate with whom;
- New and different links to outside are difficult for members to develop - they tend to have few connections, but they are usually stable;

- Privacy is valued. Members tend to be self-protective and sometimes secretive;
- Values regarding roles and rules tend to be rigid;
- Communication is tightly channeled with little expression of conflict;
- High priority given allegiance to the family;
- Can be affectionate, but controlled in expression;
- Discipline and traditions are valued. There is low tolerance of differences; and
- Change is difficult and threatening.

At the other end of the continuum is the family with very open physical boundaries. Some of the characteristics of this type of family are:

- Family members, friends and strangers enter and exit with relative ease;
- There is little privacy - space is not well regulated internally or externally;
- Members develop individual connections to external environment, do their own thing;
- Planning is not valued so much as spontaneity;
- There is a great deal of energy flowing out of family;
- There is no clear-cut decision making process - rules tend to be fluid;
- Uniqueness is prized and often encouraged;
- Emotion and affection is expressed, but not in a consistent fashion; and
- Change can lead to chaotic situations, family has a tendency to "fly apart."

Somewhere along the middle of the continuum would be the family with well-defined and moderately open boundaries. They would tend to look like this:

- There is easy access to family space, frequent guests, unlocked doors, freedom to exchange with outside;

- Members can explore outside community and groups - tend to have numerous and strong connections;
- Communication is relatively open, opinions and ideas exchanged openly, conflict can be openly expressed;
- Rules are well-defined, but flexible;
- Growth is encouraged, intimacy and nurturing patterns are adaptive, and uniqueness is tolerated within limits;
- Closeness is encouraged. There is a balance between energy flow into and out of the system; and
- Change can be somewhat stressful but the family has resources to adapt.

The degree of openness and closeness may vary with family style, preference, culture and circumstances. It would be extremely rare to find a family who fits neatly into any of these categories, though most families tend toward one type or another. Most families have a mixture of open and closed boundaries which can change depending on circumstances. As an example, a family who is actively engaged in various community activities, a characteristic of a family with open boundaries, may designate the dinner hour as their time to be together and take the phone off the hook to deliberately limit their accessibility.

Considering the implications of family boundaries is important primarily so that the child and family can come together with the least stress possible. The most important thing to remember about the external boundary is that it must be flexible enough to permit the family access to resources from the world outside the family to meet their needs in a satisfactory way.

A family has an invisible boundary that helps to define it as separate and different from other systems.

There is a wide range of boundary styles ranging from open to closed.

Internal Boundaries

In addition to its external boundaries, a family system contains a number of subsystems which create internal boundaries. The subsystems could consist, for instance, of those members who belong to the same generation (such as the children) or the same sex (the men of the family) or those who have the same interests or functions. Obviously, one individual might belong to more than one subsystem. Over a period of time, rules develop about how the subsystems interact with each other, who is included in the

subsystems, and how each member participates. In other words, a kind of boundary exists that defines the relationship between and among the subsystems.

For example, in most families the parental subsystem, be it two parents or one, will establish itself as being "in charge" of the sibling subsystem. The boundaries and rules are distinct and clear. The parent or parents may interact frequently and informally with the children, or they may be somewhat remote and formal. In some families, the interaction can be so free and open that the boundaries become blurred, and roles become confusing. In some families, the rules of interaction can tend to be so rigid that people become distant and alienated. They are not there to support each other.

People in family groups arrange themselves according to closeness and distance patterns. Aponte (1976) has written that "a family that has developed successfully will have a dependable, differentiated, and flexible system of structural alignments. Each family member will have other members on whom he or she can count to carry out family-related operations." Alignments develop between and among the individuals in a family in order to carry out tasks, developmental or otherwise, and to meet emotional needs. These alignments can shift over time, but in most families there are predictable, reliable patterns of relationships. This provides the members with dependable sources of support and nurturance. Again, there can be wide variations from family to family as to the nature and quality of these patterns. They depend in large part on such things as cultural or ethnic background, family traditions, and values.

Who is included in the subsystems can be an important issue. Sometimes a child, or perhaps a grandparent, is included in the parenting subsystem. This may be the result of circumstances - such as both parents working, or a single parent who works or needs help with parenting. It could be the cultural norm. There is nothing inherently problematic about this kind of subsystem, so long as expectations and arrangements are clear to everyone in the family.

A family has internal boundaries that define how family members relate to each other. These are subsystems based on generation, sex, interests, etc.

Role Organization

In addition to external and internal boundaries, a family is organized in terms of roles. Every family has to work out such things as who cares for the children, who does what work around the house, who makes what decisions, and who handles the money. To function well, a family must have some clarity and agreement about these roles. However, roles need not be so rigid and narrowly defined that there cannot be changes.

Role organization and expectations in any family are influenced by many factors - culture, ethnic background, experience in the family in which one grew up, life style, and family size and composition. It is possible, for example, to find a child fulfilling parental responsibilities in certain families. In some cultures, children are given responsibility as part of their training.

The way in which a family organizes itself in terms of roles is not necessarily a statement of how well or how poorly that family is functioning. Suspending value judgements and avoiding applying one's own version of the ideal type of role arrangement is sometimes very difficult. In reality, there are a variety of role arrangements, and any of them can be functional in a given family.

Although families devise many variations of workable role arrangements, it is also true that deficits can exist in some families. The family has tasks to carry out in relation to its members and to society, and it must contain enough members with the abilities to perform those tasks adequately. In the case of a single-parent family, for example, the parenting can be carried by a single adult individual or shared with an older child, a grandparent, other relative, a friend or neighbor. Any of these arrangements can be satisfactory. However, in the event that a parent experiences the stresses of the total responsibility as an overload and does not have others to call upon, a serious deficit exists.

Role organization varies greatly among families.

Ideally, roles within the family are both clear and flexible.

Family Rules

Over a period of time, family members develop rules about how they relate to each other and to the external environment. Many of these rules are "silent contracts," not openly recognized. There are rules about communication, such as "parents never argue in front of the children." There are rules about how decisions are made, how problems are solved, and about how people are supposed to think, feel, and behave. The rules are repetitive, predictable, and stable, although, like many traditions, how and why certain rules were established may be lost or forgotten. To understand families it is important to learn about the operating rules and the behavioral patterns that maintain them. The rules that are developed by the family system ensure its stability, promote cohesiveness, and help to establish the identity of a family as distinct from other families.

The way in which the rules themselves are made, whether or not they are openly recognized, and how they can be changed is also important. When the family experiences a good deal of anxiety about discussing rules or is unable to make necessary changes in rules as time and the situation require, there can be serious problems. For instance, the rules about bedtime and homework which operate in a family with young, school-aged children are no longer appropriate when the children reach high school. In one family these rules may be changed by democratic family process initiated by the children. In another the old rules may not be open for discussion and may remain rigidly in place, leaving the adolescent to choose between obeying inappropriate rules or rebelling.

Families maintain stability by developing rules about how to live together.

Families have rules about everything. Some rules are explicit and some are not. Some can be discussed and some cannot.

Families vary in the kind of rules they have, whether they can be discussed, how easily they can be changed, and how they are enforced.

Distribution of Power

All families must have ways to make decisions and to resolve conflict. In most families all members have, and need to have, a certain amount of power and influence in some areas. As Aponte (1976) has pointed out, "Family members must have enough power in the family to be able to protect their personal interests in the family at all times, while keeping the well-being of the other members, and of the family as a whole, in mind." Normally, one thinks of power and decision-making as being vested primarily in adult members of the family. However, there can be a great variation in how power is distributed and used in families.

Some families strive for equality and permit everyone to participate in decision-making. Others have a clear and rigidly defined system in which one member of the family holds most of the power. The distribution of power can shift over time as the children grow and exercise autonomy. Children come to have a voice in such matters as how the family money is spent and where the family goes on vacation.

Perhaps the most important consideration is that the family have an orderly pattern of power distribution. They need one that is reliable, permits the family group to carry out its operations in a reliable fashion, and yet is flexible enough to change as circumstances change. Overly concentrated power in one member of the family, or an arrangement that is so diffuse in distribution that members assume no responsibility, can hinder family operations, and individual growth.

Families develop characteristic ways to make decisions and to resolve conflict. Distribution of power usually shifts over time with needs of the members. It is important that there be a reliable, predictable pattern of power distribution.

Communication

The final characteristic of family systems included here is communication. It is impossible not to communicate. All behavior is communicative. Even silence is a message. A family works out its role organization, its rules of operation, all of its activities, through a process of communication. The communication system parallels the relationship system, since it is through communication that relationships are defined.

Messages have both a content and a relationship aspect. If a husband comments to his wife, "I like your blue dress," it gives her some information. Depending upon the context of the situation and the inflection of his voice, it might be a command to wear that

particular dress to a party that night. This is a message that defines the relationship in some way. He is establishing the right to express a preference and expects a positive response. She may confirm the definition and agree to wear the dress. She may also attempt to redefine the relationship by ignoring his statement or in some way convey the message that he has no control over what she wears. Conversely, the husband's comment, "I like your blue dress," may be a compliment given after she is dressed.

Communication patterns express what is going on in relationships in a family. If there is a kind of power struggle occurring between two people, it can be seen in a high level of disagreements. In an extreme situation, the competition between the participants makes decision-making almost impossible. Children in a family in which the parents are in a power struggle can often get caught in the cross-fire, getting conflicting messages from the adults. At the other extreme is a situation in which one person is always in the power position, while the other person is always "one-down." Both types of communication patterns are usually present in most relationships. The important thing is to work out an arrangement that is a satisfactory "fit" in terms of the needs, desires, and circumstances of the individuals involved, and one that permits the family to carry out its functions with respect to its members.

Families could be located on a scale ranging from "open" to "closed" kinds of communications. On one end would be those in which messages are clear and unambiguous. Individuals can reveal their needs, requests, and desires in a relatively free manner. Expectations are clear and well-defined. On the other end would be those in which messages are distorted and ambiguous. Individuals do not freely reveal their needs, and there is little congruence between what is felt, said, and done.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that there are all sorts of workable and effective communication and relationship patterns. Culture and ethnicity are significant variables to keep in mind.

Each family works out its ways of operating through a communication system. Families have many rules about communication which can be located on a scale ranging from open to closed. There is no one "ideal" type, and different styles work for different families.

The Family Through Time - Life Cycles

The family with its varying patterns of boundary organization, rules, roles, power distribution, and communication processes, also passes through a life cycle with certain identifiable stages. Each stage presents the family as a unit with new tasks. Each stage means considerable change for the family during transition from one stage to the next. The transitions associated with moving from one stage to another have come to be considered normal and sometimes stressful parts of development. The amount of stress experienced by a specific family during these transitions varies and depends upon many factors.

The transition points experienced by most nuclear families are outlined in the following framework. This framework is primarily applicable to nuclear families. There are variants in other kinds of families. The chart on the following pages lists the transition points and some of the tasks for family members associated with each.

FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

1. COMMITMENT

Tasks:

- Assume spouse roles
- Separate from family of origin
- Establish relationship with in-laws
- Establish rules of interaction (intimacy/distance)
- Divide work

2. DEVELOPING NEW PARENT ROLES

Tasks:

- Assume parent roles, expectation, values, etc.
- Assume child-rearing responsibility
- Negotiate changes in work, recreation, housing, relationships with extended family
- Establish rules and communications regarding children (intimacy/distance)

3. ACCEPTING THE NEW PERSONALITY

Tasks:

- Continue development of parental roles
- Allow development of new individual

- Relate to developing personality
- Make new space arrangements

4. INTRODUCING THE CHILD TO INSTITUTIONS OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

Tasks:

- Expand parental roles
- Support child's first separation
- Accept child's developing autonomy and accept changes in family organization
- Relate to outside institutions i.e., schools, church, sports, etc.

5. ACCEPTING ADOLESCENCE

Tasks:

- Deal with emerging sexual identity of child
- Accept increasing influence of peer group
- Promote differentiation and autonomy of child

6. EXPERIMENTING WITH INDEPENDENCE

Tasks:

- Deal with increased striving for independence
- Facilitate greater participation – child in decision making
- Participate in education and career planning
- Accept lessening of the tie to the family or origin

7. PREPARING TO LAUNCH

Tasks:

- Accept independent adult role of child
- Plan for separation

- Face own middle age transition issue

8. LETTING GO/FACING EACH OTHER AGAIN

Tasks:

- Rework spouse roles
- Face unresolved issues of the past
- Work out separation issues around children

9. ACCEPTING RETIREMENT/OLD AGE

Tasks:

- Develop role transitions and new life style
- Develop activities other than work and family responsibilities
- Face physical and emotional problems of aging
- Deal with significant losses
- Begin life review

Variations in Life Cycle

The family life cycles and the issues involved can vary a great deal depending upon cultural and ethnic differences and upon the circumstances of the individuals involved. For instance, a family in which there has been a divorce has all of the issues of separation and loss to deal with. The family essentially faces a transition from a two-parent to a one-parent family, even though there may still be involvement of both parents. The blended family, of which there are many these days, goes through a process of trying to "fit" together two family systems. The formation stages as well as latter stages can vary for these families. The couple who has never had children will face different transitions and issues than families with children.

The cultural variations in the family life cycle are great. For example, the Mexican-American life cycle is more clearly "three-generational" than the Anglo-American life cycle. Extended family members, friends, and neighbors usually play a strong role in the family life. Older members of the extended family are respected, and age is a determinant of power and control. Families tend to be protective of their members and to prize family loyalty. Ideas about when and under what circumstances young people leave home are different from middle class Anglo-American ideas.

The life stages and tasks of the single-parent family are similar to those of any family, with the exception of those that relate to couples. The single-parent family may face problems of task overload at various stages of the life cycle unless there are adequate support systems available. Other variations would include gay and lesbian couples and the stresses they may experience in their life stages and tasks. Obviously, the family life cycle must be considered in a socio-cultural content.

Families are Multi-Generational Systems

The family life cycle is not the only way in which the time dimension is important in understanding families. A family may seem to consist of only two or three current generations. It is actually greatly influenced by many past generations. It is important to understand the linkages, or lack of them, between the current family and extended family members. Values, expectations, myths, secrets, and unresolved issues around important events are transmitted from one generation to the next. This can be a powerful influence in the context of the present family and its individual members. There is an assumption here that all people, whether consciously or unconsciously, are deeply enmeshed in their family systems. The family system affects people's perceptions of who they are, how they think and communicate, and how they see themselves and others. It influences what they choose to do and be, whom they choose to be with, love, and marry. It influences how they choose to structure their new family.

Early in the life cycle, every family must make decisions about how it will relate to families of origin. How will a newly married couple relate to their own and to each other's family. For many families this can be an area of great conflict that persists over the years. Sometimes there are damaging cut-offs that divide families and limit opportunities for contact and support. The extended family can be a source of support, nurturance, and stimulation and an extremely important resource. It is essential for anyone trying to understand families to pay special attention to the intergenerational facet of family life and to understand that some of the most important people may not be current family.

The Single Parent Family

The need to be sensitive to the variety of family structures and life styles that are acceptable and functional in American society today was noted earlier. The assumption tends to exist that a family contains two parents. Yet, it is now estimated that nearly one half of all the children in the United States today will spend at least part of their lives in single-parent families. Currently, one family in five is headed by single parents. There is no question that, for a variety of reasons, the single-parent family has become almost commonplace.

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MEMORANDA HISTORY: